

# TEACHERS' Legacy

**DINO VARKEY** is CEO of the Dubai-based GEMS Education, the world's largest K-12 education provider, founded by his grandparents. He talks with Brunswick's **SIMON PLUCKROSE** about the pandemic and GEMS' targets for 21st century schooling.

SIX DECADES AGO, TWO PASSIONATE TEACHERS, KS and Mariamma Varkey, left Kerala, India, and headed for Dubai, now part of the United Arab Emirates, seeking a better life. They set up a small school inside a villa teaching math and English. And so began a 60-year journey over three generations that has seen the family business, GEMS Education, grow to become the largest K-12 private education provider in the world.

Today, GEMS Education has 42 schools in UAE and Qatar, educating more than 119,000 students, with more schools in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Europe, Africa, India, Southeast Asia and North America.

Like all education providers, GEMS experienced fundamental challenges during the pandemic, and had to act decisively to continue delivering courses and maintaining its core business. According to the United Nations, classrooms are still closed in 19 countries, affecting more than 156 million students, while less than a third of low- and middle-income countries had returned all students to in-person schooling. The UN warned that the impact on the children's education may never be recouped.

Brunswick's Simon Pluckrose sat down with the CEO of GEMS Education, Dino Varkey, now at the helm of the business founded by his grandfather, to find out more about the company's story as well as how it is addressing the challenges of the pandemic while, at the same time, preparing for the future. The delivery of education will continue to change, aided by technology, he says. But at its core, the goal of a good education for every child remains fixed.



### Can you tell me more about how the Varkey family arrived in the UAE?

I've reflected on this question a lot recently given the passing of my grandmother, Mariamma Varkey.

For me, the story of my family very much encapsulates the story of a highly educated, ambitious, lower-means family that took a courageous step. That is something that I'm drawn to: What were the values, the attributes, the decision points that my grandparents had to make to even contemplate that journey?

Of course, there is always good fortune. The late Sheikh Rashid [bin Saeed Al Maktoum, Ruler of Dubai] said he needed someone to teach his people to speak English and there was someone in his court who was from Kerala, where my family is originally from, who put up his hand and said, "I know a guy." That guy happened to be my grandfather.

So my grandfather came in 1959 and my grandmother in 1961 to initially teach the adult population English and mathematics so that the economy could start to grow, internationalize, diversify.

My grandfather was the intellectual—the mind that drives the purpose of GEMS Education—but the teacher was actually my grandmother. As a couple, they were an incredibly powerful team. One was very much about knowledge and rigor and the other about character and values and humanity. And those are all things that are embedded in what we do today.

Since our inception, our vision and purpose have never changed, the purpose of trying to provide every child with a great education no matter where they are, what they can afford, where they come from—that's what we strive to do each and every day.

The heart of this organization is that we are educators first; we're all teachers at the end of the day. That's never changed and that is something of which I am very proud.

### Do you model your leadership style on theirs?

If I wasn't able to carry within my leadership the incredible role models that I have had in my grandparents and my parents, I think I would be failing. A lot of what I choose to anchor my leadership comes from their examples. But, inevitably, it is a different generation; the challenges and the context are different and rapidly changing. So, an element of what I look to, from a leadership perspective, is based on interactions with peers. We have had the wonderful ability to interact with some great heads of state and global leaders and you draw elements

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from all of them to, hopefully, create a more comprehensive sense of your own leadership style.

### Why do you think the company has enjoyed such growth over the past 60 years?

It's always been a balancing act, but as my father says, "we've always strived to make good education decisions first." The financial outcomes will be a natural consequence of doing the right things from an educational perspective.

You start in the classroom. So, it's always going to be about the quality, passion and capability of your teachers, your education leaders. It's about delivering real value for every family in their child's education. It's about trying to fulfill the promise of delivering the potential for every family in relation to their child.

### As GEMS gets bigger, how do you ensure you keep that promise?

There is a simple marker in education that we are all trying to get to, which is to move away from an education system that was designed and built for an industrial era. The model was of very prescriptive education that enabled every child to be like every other. Today's education model is still a relic of the industrial era to a great extent. Yet, our future doesn't look like that and, actually, our children don't look like that, they're all different. If our education system is unable to recognize the individuality that drives each child then it fails.

So, how do we meet that aspiration? There is a deeply held expectation within every level of the organization that we will deliver the potential of every child. We're not going to get it right every single time, but if that's the aspiration we are working toward then, by and large, we will be successful and hopefully our track record speaks to it.

Very few organizations around the world can speak to the fact that they have over 400,000 alumni. These are young people who will have an incredible impact not just at university but beyond that for themselves, their families their communities and, ultimately, their countries and the world at large.

If we do our jobs well, we will be a powerful catalyst to change our world for the better. That's a wonderful ambition to have.

### The education of tens of thousands of children is a huge responsibility, does it keep you awake at night?

Actually, that part of it doesn't keep me awake at night. If anything it's what allows me, certainly

in the last 18 months, to sleep a bit better. I think this is because our context has been so challenging and what actually allows you to continue to work through all the challenges and the weight of the decisions is the fact that the prize at the end is so great. It is a responsibility, but one that, as a family, and me as an individual, has always been welcomed.

### **How has the pandemic impacted your ability to deliver quality education?**

What we have experienced over the course of the last 12 to 18 months feels like the most unnatural economic and social dislocation—I would even go as far as to say psychological dislocation—of our lifetime. But I am incredibly proud of what our schools, our educators, our teachers have achieved and the way in which students and parents have responded as well. It has given us the opportunity to take some of the innovation that has been embedded in the organization for some time and seamlessly use that to make the transition from remote learning. I think, as of today, we have done 44 million remote learning sessions since March of last year.

When we first went into lockdown and transitioned into remote learning, from March to June of 2020, the biggest concern for everyone was what was this going to look like. Yet when the rest of the world had a dip in terms of student academic performance, we had our best year ever.

Across every single curriculum, versus the national average, we extended our performance last year. That is testament to what our educators have achieved and to what Dubai and the United Arab Emirates have achieved in terms of managing the pandemic.

### **What challenges, professionally and personally, has COVID presented for you as CEO?**

Certainly, through the key part of the pandemic—the lockdown and the months that followed—every discussion and every meeting felt like there was a weight of consequence to decisions that perhaps we wouldn't have had in prior years. Everything from how we reopen schools safely, to how we ensure that our children are still progressing, to how we ensure our teachers don't burn out. Everything became more consequential because of the broader uncertainty, so for me, professionally and personally, dealing with that level of intensity of decision-making day after day was hard. We were resolute, though, in our belief in our ability to

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deliver high-quality education irrespective of the format and also conscious that we had to help those that were most impacted.

We are proud to have helped the families of 30,000 students. We gave circa \$20 million to \$25 million in support to those that were most impacted. At the end of the day, our belief was right as we were successful in delivering the education and our results prove it.

### **How do you see the impact of COVID on education globally?**

The biggest challenge I see as we look at the broader education landscape globally is the learning gap. Other countries don't necessarily have the technology, teachers, funding and other resources that we have had in the UAE. There will be generational consequences for millions upon millions of children from the experience they've had across countries around the world, particularly those that don't have the technology resources. To get those young people back to where they should be will require interventions that most education systems will be ill-equipped to deliver.

### **Beyond the immediate challenges, what do you think the future of education will look like?**

When we surveyed parents during remote learning, well over 90% said they would prefer their children to attend face to face. So, there will always be a place for bricks-and-mortar schools within the community. However, in 10 or 20 years' time, what goes on in those schools may look very different.

The way in which we align students on what they are working on will be completely different. Today, we organize kids in a very simple way of age and stage. In 20 years, that is not going to be the case, because we as people don't function that way. It's going to be based on ability, on aptitude, on scenarios, on peer modeling where the most able children support others.

There could also be an interesting scenario where the classroom is everywhere. The idea of your teacher, or your avatar teacher, in your ear, on your wearable. For example, a child walking through a park and asking that avatar, "What is this tree?" It doesn't negate the need for bricks-and-mortar schools but goes beyond the boundaries of the school walls to ensure students have access to the world as they learn. ♦

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